

**STATEMENT OF ARDIAN GJINI CABINET MINISTER IN THE KOSOVO  
GOVERNMENT, MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT AND SPATIAL PLANING**

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS “KOSOVO: CURRENT  
AND FUTURE STATUS**

**MAY 18,2005**

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. It is a great privilege and honor to testify in front of you today. My country, Kosova, and its people owes and indeed pays the greatest appreciation and respect for America, for your democracy and people. What you, Honorable Members of Congress and your country and people have done for Kosova is something that is unique for us in our long and difficult history. Your soldiers fought the war to liberate Kosova, and today there are schools, hospitals, roads, and courtrooms rebuilt by the contribution of the American people and government. This is the reason why today, in each house in Kosova, in each office, or even the smallest coffee shop the American flag appears alongside our national one.

Because of the long struggle and tremendous suffering of Kosovar people and because of the tremendous support that we received from the western democracies led by the United States during and after the war in the late 1990s, Kosova has progressed considerably. In 1999 we started from scratch. Today we have democratically elected mayors and local councils in all municipalities. They were elected twice in municipal elections that proved to be free and fair, and were recognized as such by all political parties and international observers. We have held two general elections. They were also conducted in the same spirit. The change of government after the October 2004 elections was one of the most dignified changes of power between prime ministers in Southeast Europe. For the first time many people in the region could witness a former and the future prime minister congratulate each other for their good work and wish each other success in the future.

Other important institutions characteristic of a democratic society have developed very fast as well. We have a vibrant civil society and an independent media that do not hesitate to criticize the government on any count. The Kosovo Police Service is recognized widely to be among the best law enforcement services in the region. The justice and court system is up and running; it is multiethnic and independent. The economy is still poor, but there are strong reasons for believing that it will improve dramatically as soon as the most important obstacles to economic growth, especially the lack of final status, are removed. The great entrepreneurial spirit of Kosovars, our very fertile farm land and other vast natural resources, and most importantly, the strong determination of the government and the society to have a free market economy based on private investment are among the reasons for optimism about Kosova's future economy.

We have made significant strides in integrating minorities. Today, one can see all across Kosovo street signs and institution logos in three languages, Albanian, Serb and English. There is one

Serb and one Bosnian Minister in the government of twelve Ministers. In the last year, there was no interethnic violent incident whatsoever.

We have moved ahead with cooperation in the region as well. Free trade agreements are being prepared with neighbors such as Macedonia, Croatia and Bosnia Herzegovina. An agreement with Albania has already been signed. We have high-level bilateral and multilateral contacts at all levels with our counterparts in the region. The dialogue with Serbia is already taking place at technical levels on matters such as energy or missing persons, and we strongly believe that in the very near future we will have contacts and dialogue at the highest political level.

I do know that there are people in the region who view the perspective that I have just articulated with suspicion. However, Kosova's achievements are not minor when we think back only five years ago to the war and the crimes that were committed by Serbian dictator Slobodan Milosevic and his henchmen. Many of the achievements that I mentioned were not even imaginable among the strongest optimists in 2000.

Now we are approaching the time when the status of Kosova needs to be determined. For the vast majority of the people in Kosova, final status means independence. This is why any other status risks not being final. For almost a century there has been a struggle for freedom and independence. The intensity of the struggle has varied over time, but it culminated in the war of 1998-1999. The solutions like partition or union with any other country are rejected by the Kosovars and by their political representatives.

The government and people of Kosova understand that there is a need for strong guarantees for human rights, freedom of movement, religious freedom, and all other rights that a human being should enjoy in any democracy. Here I am referring especially to the Serb minority living in Kosovo. As I mentioned above, a lot has been achieved, but there is a lot yet to be done. The most important thing I would say is to build trust among Kosovo Serbs that they can live in freedom and dignity without any fear in their own country, Kosovo. This is not an easy task. There are two main difficulties that must be overcome to achieve this. First, the unresolved status of Kosova hinders the possibility of the government to adopt policies that will give concrete guarantees. We are left only with the ability to verbalize our vision, but not to implement it. Second, there is a lack of support of any kind from the government of Serbia. Belgrade has refused to help both the international community and us help Kosovo Serbs. In fact, they continuously obstructed our efforts.

The violence that occurred in March 2004 was a serious setback to interethnic relations. No argument can justify the loss of human lives and the destruction of Orthodox churches and monasteries. The government has since allocated money, and programs are being developed for the reconstruction of all holy sites in Kosovo. In relation to these efforts, there is very generous support from the international community as well. Regrettably, the process has come to a standstill because of the refusal of the Serbian Orthodox Church to cooperate with government and UNMIK to start the rebuilding process. However, a few weeks ago we received some very positive signals from the Serbian Orthodox Church, and I am confident that the rebuilding process will start very soon.

Last year's violence created the impression that Kosovar Albanians are against the Orthodox Church. It is my obligation here today to say that that is simply not true. Two weeks ago I visited the Decan Monastery, together with the SRSG Soren Jessen-Petersen, the head of the US Office in Prishtina Philip Goldberg, and other international friends who serve in Kosovo. It was my pleasure to be there for Orthodox Easter and also to hear from an Orthodox priest, Father Teodosije, that throughout history, there were Muslim and Catholic Albanians who lost their lives protecting the Monastery. We Kosovars know it. It was never a surprise for us because religion is something that we respect. We view these churches as a very important part of the heritage of our country. Interreligious respect is at the core of the Albanian reality. Albanian Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox people have coexisted, often intermarried, and respected each other for almost 500 years. Relations between religions among Albanians are so relaxed that the re-conversion of Muslims to the religion of their grandparents, Catholicism, is happening fast. This is not a problem for Albanians; it is perceived to be something normal and a matter of individual choice.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I would like to say something about what kind of independence we want. First of all, we want a democracy that will respect the will of the people, that will create conditions for every single citizen to live in peace, freedom, dignity, and well being, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, race or gender. We want to be part of the European Union, NATO and other Euro Atlantic institutions. We strongly believe that this is our destiny. We want NATO to have a permanent mission in Kosovo, because it has proven to be the best guarantor of peace and stability in the region. We will work hard to have good relations with all our neighbors, and we want to continue our permanent and very close relationship with the United States.

Thank you,